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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 000444

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA/FO, SA/A, EB/OTP, EB/CBA
NSC FOR AHARRIMAN, AMEND
CENTCOM FOR CG CFC-A
TREASURY FOR PARAMESWARAN
COMMERCE FOR AADLER
TRANSPORTATION FOR DMODESITT
FAA FOR JHANCOCK AND TMARZIN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2016

TAGS: [BAIR](#) [ECON](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: ARIANA UNSCHEDULED FLIGHT DIVERSIONS ON JANUARY
23, 2006

Classified by Economic Officer Michael Kidwell. Reasons 1.4
(b,d).

Summary

1. (C) On January 23, 2006, Minister of Transport Qasimi requested expedited landing clearance at Kandahar Airfield for two flights from Ariana Afghan Airlines, the state-owned carrier. While the Minister gave no details to justify the request, Post learned from Ariana that passengers (pilgrims returning from the Hajj in Saudi Arabia) on one or both of the flights had threatened the crew if the planes did not proceed directly to Kandahar Airfield (operated by Combined Forces Air Component Command (CFACC)) instead of to Kabul. Ariana eventually rerouted the flights to Kandahar and Post obtained landing clearance for the aircraft. Post does not believe there were terrorist motives to the attack, but rather that an unruly group of Afghan pilgrims, fed up with Ariana service, was desperate to get home as soon as possible. Still, the Minister's unwillingness to disclose the details of the incident (both to the Embassy and the Afghan Presidency) raises serious concerns about the transparency and safety of aviation operations in Afghanistan. Post recommends that the USG keep this incident in mind when considering Afghan requests for Ariana service into the US (operated by wet-lease via a European stopover). End summary.

2. (C) Minister of Transport Enayatullah Qasimi contacted Embassy FAA officer just before 17:00 on January 23 to request landing clearance in Kandahar for Ariana aircraft carrying pilgrims returning from Saudi Arabia after the Hajj. (Note: Due to ongoing runway refurbishment at Kandahar, the airport is currently only open from sunrise to 12:00 noon each day. Clearance for returning Hajj flights has been granted at different times provided that the Ministry of Transport requests such clearance 24 hours in advance.) The Minister declined to provide a justification for the expedited clearance. Consequently, Embassy FAA officer contacted Ariana Airlines directly to find out the details about the aircraft and why they needed expedited clearance for Kandahar. Lufthansa Consultant and acting CEO of Ariana Hanns Marienfeld informed him that pilgrims on two Ariana A300 aircraft had "threatened to kill the crew" if they were not taken directly to Kandahar. (Note: Given that Hajj pilgrims on board Ariana flights have previously killed two ministers, such threats must be viewed as credible. While Ariana could not specify whether the threat was directed at the flight crew or cabin crew, it is likely that it was aimed at the cabin crew as the pilot was in constant contact with Ariana and appeared relatively calm. End note.) It was unclear initially where the two planes were and for most of the evening January 23, Post understood that the planes were on the ground at Ras Al Khaima airstrip in the United Arab Emirates. On January 24, Post learned that one aircraft had indeed been in Ras Al Khaima (UAE), but that the other had been in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

3. (C) Embassy staff liaised with appropriate CFC-A and CJTF76 staff to obtain clearance at Kandahar and to coordinate a response. Post was unable to obtain manifests for the flights at the time. (Note: Post believes that Ariana may not have even created detailed manifests for the flights. However, Post believes it unlikely that any Amcits were onboard. End note.) After Embassy FAA officer clarified with Ariana that the aircraft were on the ground in Ras Al Khaima (only partly true as it turned out), Post informed AmEmbassy Abu Dhabi, and FAA Kabul coordinated further actions with FAA Abu Dhabi.

4. (C) Embassy FAA officer confirmed landing clearance with the Kandahar Airfield. When Combined Forces Air Component Command (CFACC) staff confronted Minister Qasimi about the unfolding events, the Minister reluctantly acknowledged that passengers had "threatened bodily harm" if they were not

taken to Kandahar. However, according to Ariana staff in Kabul (who were in touch with the flight crew by radio), the passengers made death threats against the crew. Information available at the time indicated that this was a not a planned hijacking or terrorist action. Most of the pilgrims had been in Saudi Arabia for almost six weeks, and many had been delayed when transferred from Kandahar to Kabul as they departed for Hajj in early December. Post believes that these were tired, unruly pilgrims that wanted to get home and had no other agenda. The Charge also informed President Karzai's chief of staff about the incident as the Ministry of Transport had not informed the Presidency. The chief of staff asked for U.S. support in facilitating landings at Kandahar. (Note: Subsequently, the President's chief of staff confirmed that the Ministry of Transport never responded to his request for more details on the incident. End note.)

15. (C) Post is unable to confirm how the incident began. Initial reports from Ariana indicated that both aircraft were making scheduled stops in Ras Al Khaima before proceeding to Kabul. Passengers on one aircraft then threatened the crew and demanded to be taken to Kandahar directly. Passengers on the second plane heard about the first incident and then made the same threats and demands. Another, perhaps more plausible, report suggests that the first A300 was en route to Kabul, as the pilot had determined before take off that he did not want to land an A300 at night in Kandahar (Note: The airstrip is narrow and the approach is more dangerous at night. Landing would have been safer at Kabul. End note.) Though Post confirmed that Ariana had determined earlier that week not to use A300s for flights into Kandahar, Ariana may not have announced that decision to its passengers. In-flight, when the pilot announced that the aircraft was en route to Kabul, the passengers became unruly and threatened the crew. The aircraft then made an unscheduled stop in Ras Al Khaima. Based on lack of action by UAE authorities and reports from the DATT in Abu Dhabi, it appears that Ariana never informed the airport tower or airport authorities in UAE about the situation. It is unclear how the second aircraft heard of these events or if, in fact, the passengers of the second plane (which Post now knows was in Jeddah at the time) even made similar threats and demands.

16. (C) At approximately 19:30, Embassy FAA officer confirmed that two Ariana-operated 727s were en route to Ras Al Khaima. The smaller planes are easier to land in Kandahar and were piloted by different crews. Ariana transferred all 220 passengers from the A300 in Ras Al Khaima onto the two 727s. Both planes flew directly to Kandahar with local landing times of approximately 02:00 and 03:00. The second A300 arrived from Jeddah into Kandahar at local time 06:00. Ariana reported no further unrest from the passengers. At the request of Minister Qasimi, Kandahar Airfield granted 24/7 landing rights for Hajj flights for the next few days. This should expedite return of the Afghan pilgrims from Saudi Arabia and reduce the likelihood of further incidents.

Comment

17. (C) This incident raises serious concerns about the transparency of flight operations on the part of Ariana and the Ministry of Transport. The Minister was quite willing to request landing clearance without informing the airfield about the unruly, threatening passengers onboard the incoming aircraft. Further, neither Ariana nor the Ministry were willing to provide a manifest of the flight, though both maintained that no Amcits were onboard the flights. The Ministry and Ariana seem to be more concerned about public perceptions than about the safety of their passengers. Post anticipates that, if pressed, Ariana and the Ministry may deny that the incident took place. Post recommends that this incident be a strong factor in considering whether or not to support Ariana's and the Minister's request for a wet-lease flight into the US (with a European stopover). End comment.

NORLAND